



# Agriculture in Pennsylvania

**A**griculture is Pennsylvania's number one industry. Although Pennsylvania is often recognized for its mining, steel, and manufacturing industries, Pennsylvania has always been a leader in agriculture.

The first farmers in what is now Pennsylvania were Native Americans. The Delaware or Lenape Indians of the Delaware Valley region planted corn while the Monongahela Indians of the Upper Ohio Valley region in western Pennsylvania grew corn, beans, and squash. On Native American sites, archaeologists have found storage pits for preserving dried corn and other foods.

Pennsylvanian's pioneers brought their own farming traditions with them. In the rich farmlands of Lancaster and York Counties, German immigrants took up farming and created the Pennsylva-

nia style barn, now a familiar landmark on the Pennsylvania landscape. Pennsylvania barns are of two main types: Holstein and Swiss. The Holstein barn originated in northern Germany and is constructed of wood and stone with a wide front roof. The Swiss barn is also built of stone and wood except but has no basement and the building is smaller. Pennsylvania German farmers also brought innovations to farming when they introduced crop rotation, sowing a different crop—corn, oats, wheat, and clover—on each field over a four-year period. It was not uncommon for townspeople to keep a cow or two and tend a garden to raise vegetables. Farmers also owned mills and worked at iron furnaces on occasion.

During the pioneer era of Pennsylvania agriculture, over half of all Pennsylvanians lived on farms.

Farm families doubled as farm workers, including children. There were few hired laborers during colonial times but apprentices and indentured laborers were common. Indentured laborers worked usually to pay off a debt such as the cost of their passage to Pennsylvania from their home country such as England, Scotland, Ireland, or Germany. Apprenticeship was looked upon as not merely labor but a form of education. In 1682 William Penn wrote in his *Frame of Government* "all children within this province of the age of twelve shall be taught some useful skill or trade."

Only about 10 percent of all African American slaves in Pennsylvania worked on colonial farms; the majority of slaves worked in urban households as domestic workers. Within certain farming regions, however, blacks were employed on farms. Samuel Hart of Bucks County said that in 1785 "I could stand on a corner of my farmer's farm . . . and count sixteen farm houses, and in every house were slaves."

Pennsylvania farmers sold their fresh vegetables, fruits and meat to townspeople at farmers' markets from within the market shed as well as from wagons at the curbs. The chief crops produced during the pioneer era of Pennsylvania farming were wheat, corn, oats, rye, barley, potatoes, fruit, and hay. Agents hired drovers to ride through the countryside on horseback. They would buy flocks and herds from farmers to take to the town farmers' market to be sold. William Schell of Bedford County recalled that "the horse drover would generally have about thirty horses; sometimes these were tied to a long cable, on each side, but mostly six horses were abreast, tied to each other, with a rider on one of them. I have often seen two droves of horses passing through Bedford in a single day." When drovers reached their destination, the market was often crude and primitive. Philadelphia's first marketplace (1693) was a shed on the corner of First and Market Streets. Chester, Germantown, and New Castle had their own markets by 1698. In Harrisburg, the first farmers' markets were built soon after the town was laid out in 1785.

In 1765 America's oldest agricultural fair started when the Penn family permitted York County farmers to exhibit their produce. The char-



Carlisle square on market day, c. 1865. (Cumberland County Historical Society, Line Collection)

ter signed by Thomas Penn, son of Pennsylvania founder William Penn granted York the privilege of "forever hereafter" holding two fairs a year, one in spring and one in the fall. Although temporarily discontinued after 1815, the York Fair was revived in 1853 and has been held annually at the York Fairgrounds ever since.

During the Revolutionary War era official groups were formed in the Commonwealth to advocate farming and horticulture. The first American organization dedicated to agricultural reform, the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture, was started in 1785. Through publications and public forums this organization informed farmers, providing practical advice about problems such as insect control and the latest farm equipment. In 1809 the Pennsylvania Society for Improving the Breed of Cattle was organized, and in 1827 the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society was formed.



*Peffer Threshing Machine at the Myers farm, August 14, 1913. (CCHS, Line Collection)*

During the period 1820-1920, the application of science to farming led to a revolution in farming equipment. Early in the nineteenth century Joseph and Robert Smith of Berks County invented a practical cast iron plow that was an immediate success with farmers and a thresher that cleaned and threshed grain in a single operation (patented by Andrew Ralston in 1842) was produced in the factory of Robert McClure in Washington County. By 1850 farming implements like mechanical mowers, McCormick's reaper, and steam tractors were in general use in farming communities.

As farm equipment became more complex, more educational resources were made available to the farmer. In 1857, Frederick Watts built a 116-acre model farm in Cumberland County to promote his ideas about farm efficiency. Commenting on the steam tractor in 1879, Watts observed: "This power is generally owned by individuals who go from farm to farm and thresh the grain for an agreed price, varying from three cents to five cents per bushel for wheat and oats." An influential agricultural reformer, Watts was the first president of the Pennsylvania Agricultural Society, founded in 1851.

Transportation of produce to market was a challenge in a state as geographically diverse as Pennsylvania. Wagons, canal boats, and railroads were all means of transporting farm products in the nineteenth century. Many of the goods from Pittsburgh and western Pennsylvania farms moved by boat and barge down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to markets in the growing towns of Cincinnati, St. Louis, and New Orleans, while produce from central and eastern Pennsylvania made their way to Philadelphia and Baltimore.

In 1862, the Agricultural College of Pennsylvania, now Pennsylvania State University, was founded with Evan Pugh (1828-1864) as the first president. Under Pugh's leadership Penn State led the movement toward public education in the scientific methodology in agriculture.

In 1870, the State Grange, founded by Oliver Hudson Kelly, became a vital force in educating farmers about new technology and farming techniques throughout the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania formed a Board of Agriculture in 1876 to oversee the proper use of scientific methods in farming. State legislation quickly followed, enlarging the work the board had to do: the Commercial Fertilizer Law, 1879; Butter and Cheese Act, 1883; and the Animal Disease Control Law, 1887. The 1895 legislation that created the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture transferred to it the three basic functions the board had held: law enforcement, education, and prevention of plant and animal disease. The department established agricultural extension stations throughout the Commonwealth so that farmers could learn more profitable methods of raising crops and produce. For example, as a result of extension station education, turkey production in Pennsylvania increased from 150,000 in 1920 to more than 500,000 in 1940.

Changing trends in Pennsylvanians' eating habits caused a change in the nature of Pennsylvania's farms. In 1914 the Pennsylvania Department



*African American and other migrant workers have increasingly replaced family labor on farms. (Pennsylvania State Archives)*

of Agriculture noted that “the past few years have seen a great change in the dairy business of this State—that is, instead of producing butter and cheese, we furnish now much more whole milk for city consumption. On the farm, instead of the raising of pigs and young cattle, you find only cows.”

New developments in farming appeared at the first Farm Show, held in Harrisburg in January 1917. It quickly grew into one of the world’s largest indoor agriculture shows. In 1931 a new main exhibition building for the show opened and in 1939 another exhibit arena was added. Today, the Farm Show continues to be a popular venue for both farmers and the public. Unlike many state fairs, it is held each year in January. The original committee that instituted the Farm Show thought that “farmers at that time of year wanted to look ahead to the coming season, especially in buying implements, seed, fertilizer, and other supplies.”

The modern era of agriculture in Pennsylvania saw dramatic changes in farm labor,

technology, and the size of farms. Concern about the neglect of the education of youth led to the passage of child labor laws in 1915 and 1935. These laws restricted the number of hours that children could work on a farm during school hours. When refrigerated trucks were developed, truck farming grew as a means to supply fruits and vegetables for city markets. Louise Brown, an African American woman from Scranton ran the G. W. Brown Trucking Company that carried farm products to A & P supermarkets in the 1930s and 1940s. Refrigerated trucks helped the dairy industry in Pennsylvania boom and the state’s cream cheese and ice creams became national household staples.

Developing technology continued to improve the life of Pennsylvania farmers. After 1930, the introduction of electricity in rural areas and the availability of electrical household conveniences lessened the burden of the farm family. The evolution of tractor-drawn machinery resulted in less dependence upon horses and other animals for cultivating farmland. The introduction of radios and telephones made farming communities less socially isolated.

Innovation continued to be a hallmark of Pennsylvania agriculture. In 1939, a seven-hundred-acre watershed was established to divert water for irrigating farmland was built at Honey Hollow Creek in Bucks County. This watershed was the first in the nation to demonstrate that, with federal dollars and cooperative action, soil, water, wildlife conservation, and flood prevention could be achieved.

Like other Pennsylvanians during the Great Depression, farmers searched for ways to survive. Many Pennsylvania farmers opposed the federal Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 that restricted the freedom of the farmer to raise crops and livestock. Only 5 percent of the Commonwealth’s wheat farmers signed contracts to reduce wheat production in 1934. However, many farmers were receptive to other New Deal programs for agriculture, including the farm credit program, the tenant-

purchase loan plan, and the federal government's offer to buy surplus crops.

Following World War II, agriculture became less attractive as a livelihood as the cost of labor and equipment increased. Many farm youngsters migrated to urban areas. In response to this labor shortage, the Pennsylvania State Employment Service recruited migrant farm workers, especially African Americans and Puerto Ricans. Migrant farm labor continues to be utilized today while the number of farmers has declined. Between 1960 and 1970 over 300,000 people left the rural regions of Pennsylvania when small farms were no longer profitable. Agricultural companies or suburban housing developers bought out many small farms and the expansion of the interstate highway system depleted farmland even more.

The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture has worked to address the changing Pennsylvania farm so that farmers will be more productive with less labor and less land. Since the 1970s a number of laws were passed by the Pennsylvania General Assembly to aid the farmer.

Today, the Keystone State has one of the largest rural populations in the nation with a total of 59,000 farms. According to the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, 2 million Pennsylvanians were directly employed in farm work in

1999. In the twenty-first century, the best farming areas are located in the counties of southeastern Pennsylvania, especially Berks, Lancaster and York Counties.

Dairying is Pennsylvania's number one agricultural industry; the state is the fourth largest milk producing state and fourth in the country in the production of ice cream. Dairy farming is centered in the northeast and southwest. Erie County is noted for its fruits and vegetables. Other farm regions supply specialized crops such as mushrooms near Avondale and Kennett Square, cigar-leaf tobacco around York and Lancaster and maple sugar and Christmas trees within the Allegheny Plateaus. Livestock sales account for 68 percent of Pennsylvania's farm income.

Pennsylvania is America's fourth largest producer of food products. While nearly every county has some type of food plant, Philadelphia, Dauphin, Allegheny, Berks, York, Lancaster, and Montgomery Counties employ the most food workers. Philadelphia is known for its bakery products, its ice creams, and its candies. Hershey in Dauphin County is the home of Hershey Foods while York County is home to Hanover Foods. There are fruit canneries in Adams County and vegetable canneries in Northumberland County. Since 1869 when Henry J. Heinz began bottling horserad-

*A Lehigh Valley farm with all its outbuildings. (PHMC)*



ish and ketchup, Pittsburgh has been world-famous as the home of Heinz products.

Today the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture continues its original mission and conducts scientific studies and publishes bulletins on many agricultural subjects. The department helps monitor animal health and plant diseases, encourage the marketing of Pennsylvania agricultural products, and administers an active farmland preservation program. It monitors Pennsylvania laws that apply to farmers and provides protection for the public through its regulatory programs for farm produce, milk sanitation, canned foods, food employee service certification, and other food-related issues. The department administers the Pennsylvania Farm show that highlights the contributions of the thousands of Pennsylvania farm families.

Agriculture in Pennsylvania has a long and rich history and it is an industry that promises to keep on growing and changing over time.



*Food production is an important part of Pennsylvania agriculture. H.J. Heinz bottling plant in Pittsburgh, c. 1940. (Pennsylvania State Archives)*

*Text by Eric Ledell Smith, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission*

### For further reading

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